



ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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Bangkok

**REVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE STRUCTURE OF THE
COMMISSION: RESOLUTION 48/2**

(Item 5 of the provisional agenda)

**REPORT OF THE REGIONAL PREPARATORY MEETING ON THE
REVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE STRUCTURE
OF THE COMMISSION**

A. Background

1. The Regional Preparatory Meeting on the Review of the Conference Structure of the Commission was convened at Bangkok, from 24 to 28 February 1997, in pursuance of Commission resolutions 48/2 of 23 April 1992 on restructuring the conference structure of the Commission and 52/1 of 24 April 1996 on preparation for the review of the conference structure of the Commission.
2. The specific objective of the Meeting was to review the conference structure of the Commission and propose changes, where appropriate, for the consideration of the Commission at its fifty-third session, with a view to improving the functioning of the conference structure, including its thematic priorities and subsidiary structure.
3. The Meeting was part of a continuing reform effort being carried out by the Commission to improve its performance and its relevance to the countries of the region. Areas that had been considered in the past included institutional streamlining, priority-setting in the work programme, measures to pre-empt duplication of work, greater transparency, more effective resource utilization, and measures to enhance the accountability of the Commission.
4. Among the tangible results of the reform effort in connection with the conference structure were the reduction in the number of legislative bodies and the biennialization of the sessions of several of those bodies, the streamlining of the subsidiary bodies of the Commission through the adoption of more focused agendas for their sessions, a reduction in the duration of the sessions of the legislative committees, the streamlining of the conduct of the annual sessions of the Commission by reducing the number of working days from 10 to 7, and a reduction in the number and length of documents for the Commission and its subsidiary bodies.
5. Among other reform measures that had been effected were the reorientation of the work programme to a thematic approach, which led to a more coherent and focused clustering of activities, thus enabling more efficient use of the multidisciplinary expertise of the secretariat, and the consequent restructuring of the secretariat, including the streamlining of its administrative support functions and the enhancement of substantive activities through the redeployment of posts to priority programme areas.
6. In 1994, the Executive Secretary established the Regional Inter-agency Committee for Asia and the Pacific to identify areas for inter-agency cooperation, with a view to avoiding duplication of work among the United Nations agencies active in economic and social development affairs in Asia and the Pacific, and to strengthen regional coordination of activities within the United Nations system. In 1994, the Executive Secretary also initiated annual consultative meetings with the heads of the region's major subregional organizations^{1/} to strengthen inter-subregional cooperation.

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^{1/} Association of South East Asian Nations, Economic Cooperation Organization, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and South Pacific Commission.

7. In the context of the reform of the United Nations, the ESCAP programme budget for the biennium 1996-1997 was reduced by 5.6 per cent (US\$ 3.75 million). It was expected that the Commission's programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 would be reduced by a further 5.3 per cent (US\$ 3.5 million) to US\$ 62,875,000. The reductions included the freezing of vacant posts in the secretariat during the biennium 1996-1997 and the proposed abolition of 26 posts in the biennium 1998-1999. A 6.4 per cent vacancy rate in the secretariat would be maintained during the biennium 1998-1999.

8. In addition, the role of the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission (ACPR) had been expanded to include the offering of advice to the Executive Secretary in drawing up proposals for the medium-term plan and the programme budget, and monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the ESCAP programme of work. ACPR had also formulated criteria for priority-setting in the work programme. The criteria, which were endorsed by the Commission at its fiftieth session, held in 1994, continue to be applied strictly by the secretariat in the formulation of its work programme.

9. It was against this background of continuing reform to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the Commission in serving its 60 members and associate members that the current Meeting was convened.

B. Proceedings

1. Background documentation

10. The Meeting had before it the following documents: "Findings and recommendations of the ESCAP secretariat Task Force on ESCAP Reform" (PMD/CSC/1); "Report of ACPR on the review of the conference structure of the Commission" (PMD/CSC/2); "Views and comments of eminent persons on the review of the conference structure of the Commission" (PMD/CSC/3 and Add.1); and "Others issues relevant to the conference structure" (PMD/CSC/INF.1 and Add.1).

11. In introducing the document on the findings and recommendations of the ESCAP secretariat Task Force on ESCAP Reform, the Executive Secretary emphasized that the report represented the considered views of senior secretariat officers as to the most effective and feasible means for reform of the conference structure of ESCAP within the broader framework of United Nations reform. The Task Force report provided an assessment of the performance of the current conference, programme and secretariat structure. In the light of the strengths and weaknesses of the current structure, the report proposed a revised conference and programme structure and it recommended certain changes in the secretariat's operations, based on the principle of congruence among structural levels. The Executive Secretary expressed his satisfaction with the Task Force report, noting that ACPR had relied on it extensively in formulating its own report on the conference structure of the Commission.

12. The Executive Secretary also introduced the comments on Task Force report, which had been received from three eminent persons, namely Ungku A. Aziz, Royal Professor and former Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya; Rafeuddin Ahmed, Associate Administrator, United Nations Development Programme and former Executive Secretary of ESCAP; and Kuniko Inoguchi, Professor of International Relations, Sophia University, Japan. He recommended the comments of the three eminent persons to the Meeting, noting that they provided a valuable adjunct to the Task Force report as a basis for the Meeting's deliberations.

13. The chairperson, in his capacity as designated representative of ACPR, introduced the report of ACPR on the review of the conference structure of the Commission (PMD/CSC/2). He noted that in arriving at its recommendations, ACPR had been guided by the responses of the governments of the members and associate members to the secretariat questionnaire and had also benefited from the report of the Task Force on ESCAP Reform. ACPR had considered the thematic approach to be a viable and useful means of focusing the work of the Commission. It had recommended, furthermore, that the conference structure should comprise six major committees subsidiary to the Commission, and that there should be greater congruence between the committee and programme structures. With those points of consensus in mind, it had reviewed the work of the committees and had considered various aspects of their terms of reference.

2. Formal deliberations

14. The Meeting deliberated on the findings and recommendations contained in the reports of the Task Force and ACPR, as well as the views of the eminent persons on the Task Force report. The deliberations focused, in particular, on the thematic approach, the proposed conference structure, the conduct of the Commission's annual sessions and the role of ACPR. The representatives of the members and associate members of the Commission shared the views and experiences of their governments which had been gained through the implementation of Commission resolution 48/2. Those views reflected both benefits and constraints.

15. The Meeting took into account the multifaceted role of the Commission as the only intergovernmental regional forum for the Asian and Pacific region as a whole for the exchange of national economic and social development views and experiences. In addition, it noted the role of the Commission as a regional body for policy-oriented socio-economic research and analysis and as an executing agency of technical assistance. It also noted that ESCAP continued to contribute to the coordination of the United Nations bodies and specialized agencies in the region as well as major subregional intergovernmental groupings.

16. The Commission's decision, under resolution 48/2, to adopt a thematic conference structure was reviewed extensively by the Meeting. It was observed that the thematic approach had enabled

the secretariat to undertake more multidisciplinary activities, in consonance with the comparative advantage of ESCAP *vis-à-vis* the specialized agencies of the United Nations and other agencies that had competence in individual disciplines. The thematic approach had also brought about greater interaction among secretariat personnel. The Task Force had noted in its report that the thematic approach had fostered a better understanding by staff of the work of other Divisions and enhanced interdivisional working linkages. Above all, on a priority theme such as regional economic cooperation, the secretariat's activities had acquired greater thrust.

17. On the other hand, it was acknowledged that the thematic structure had not brought about very substantial improvements in the Commission's work. Difficulties stemmed from the fact that the division of responsibilities among government ministries in the region, as well as within the ESCAP secretariat, continued to be based mainly on sectoral lines. That had necessitated a considerable degree of coordination all around, which had not been easy to achieve, to take full advantage of the thematic approach. The thematic arrangements had also not attracted greater ministerial or high-level participation in the relevant meetings of the Commission. In addition, since the themes were very broad, covering a wide range of areas, there had sometimes been a blurring of focus, with the result that the secretariat had had to spread its resources too thinly.

18. On balance however, the Meeting viewed the advantages of the thematic approach as outweighing the disadvantages. Considering that a process of evolution was preferable to any radical change, it felt that the right approach would be to consolidate the gains wherever made and make the necessary changes in the case of those committees and subprogrammes where some reordering of programme areas or a clearer expression of focus could be of advantage. That was particularly felt with respect to the themes relating to poverty alleviation, and environment and sustainable development. On the other hand, the work of the two sectoral committees, the Committee on Transport and Communications and the Committee on Statistics, was considered satisfactory.

19. In proposing change to the existing conference structure, the Meeting considered it extremely important to take into account current development trends in the region, wherein the imperatives of closer regional and subregional cooperation, rapid urbanization and accelerated infrastructure development were becoming increasingly evident and needed to be addressed adequately. It was considered important that any changes to the conference structure should take into account the current budgetary situation of the United Nations.

3. Informal consultations

20. Informal consultations were held on Tuesday afternoon, 25 February 1997 and Wednesday, 26 February 1997, to deliberate on the various views expressed by delegations regarding the proposed conference structure and related matters. The outcome of those informal consultations was presented

in several conference room papers submitted to the plenary. Formal sessions of the plenary were resumed on Thursday, 27 February 1997.

4. Recommendations

(a) General

21. The reform of the conference structure should seek to bring about the wider participation of members and associate members in the Commission. It should aim to sharpen the focus of work of the Commission and its Committees, and thereby to improve the effectiveness and efficiency in the delivery of the ESCAP work programme. Within that context, the terms of reference of the Committees should be flexible so as to enable ESCAP to respond to new demands and adjust its priorities in the light of the region's rapidly changing economic and social circumstances.

22. Conformity between the conference structure and the programme and secretariat structure would be a desirable means of ensuring the effective and efficient functioning of the Commission.

23. All Commission and Committee documents should be despatched expeditiously to allow the member and associate member governments enough time to undertake the related preparatory work.

24. The secretariat's attention was drawn to the requirement that documents should be circulated six weeks in advance of intergovernmental meetings.

25. Governments were urged to respond expeditiously to communications from the secretariat to enable it to undertake the necessary preparations for intergovernmental meetings.

(b) Commission sessions

26. The Commission sessions should continue to be held on an annual basis, comprising a senior officials' segment followed by a ministerial segment.

27. A time limit should be set for the delivery of each delegation's prepared statements at the Commission sessions. The suggested time limit would be seven minutes per statement. Written statements by heads of delegations could be circulated.

28. The possibility of holding an informal session among the heads of delegations during the ministerial segment of each Commission session should be considered. It should be organized on a year-by-year basis and should not be institutionalized. The agenda should be decided by consensus before each session to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of each session.

29. Whatever conference structure was adopted by the Commission, the number, frequency and duration of intergovernmental meetings should be reduced wherever possible, and the amount of documentation submitted to those meetings should be limited. In conformity with that intent, a review

should be undertaken by ACPR after the fifty-third session of the Commission of the possibility of further reducing the number of days of the annual Commission session from the current seven working days.

(c) Committees subsidiary to the Commission

30. The conference structure should include the following five committees subsidiary to the Commission, with the periodicity of sessions as indicated below:

- (1) Committee on Regional Economic Cooperation, which would be assisted by a Steering Group (biennial, with the Steering Group meeting annually).
- (2) Committee on Socio-economic Measures to Alleviate Poverty in Rural and Urban Areas (annual)
- (3) Committee on Environment and Natural Resources Development (annual)
- (4) Committee on Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development (annual)
- (5) Committee on Statistics (biennial)

31. The duration of the sessions of the Committees should be three days.

32. The Special Body on Least Developed and Landlocked Developing Countries, as well as the Special Body on Pacific Island Developing Countries, should be not only retained but reinvigorated. The sessions of the Special Bodies should be held biennially, one each in alternate years, back-to-back with the annual sessions of the Commission.

33. The following guidelines for the Committees' terms of reference were proposed:

(1) Committee on Regional Economic Cooperation. This Committee would seek to promote regional economic cooperation through greater trade, investment and technology flows, and it would address major regional concerns in the trade, industry and technology sectors. It would seek to enhance greater subregional cooperation and inter-subregional cooperation and promote linkages where there are articulated needs for growth triangles or other similar mechanisms. Opportunities for promoting cross-border trade would also be examined. Industrial restructuring, with possible relocations within the region, and technology transfer are other areas that would be addressed.

(2) Committee on Socio-economic Measures to Alleviate Poverty in Rural and Urban Areas. This Committee would serve as a forum for promoting cooperation on social and economic development issues facing rural and urban areas, with particular reference to ushering in economic growth and alleviating poverty. Specific measures for dealing with issues arising from population factors, urbanization pressures and human settlement needs would be examined. The Committee would address in particular employment generation, extension of rural credit and creation of technical

skills. It would also address the issues of human resources development, enhancement of the quality of life of disadvantaged groups and the effective delivery of social services. Social integration, in particular the integration of women in all aspects of the development process, would be given due attention.

(3) Committee on Environment and Natural Resources Development. This Committee would review and identify priority issues in the development of natural resources, including water, minerals and energy (excluding infrastructural aspects of electric power, which would be dealt with by the Committee on Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development) and would also review and assess the state of the environment in the region, identify the major environmental concerns, and encourage the integration of environmental concerns into development policies and strategies. It would address issues relating to the transfer of environmentally sound technology for sustainable development, natural disaster reduction, and the application of space information technologies to natural resources management and environmental monitoring.

(4) Committee on Transport, Communications, Tourism and Infrastructure Development. This Committee would consider major regional infrastructure development issues and concerns relating to transport, communications, tourism and infrastructure aspects of electric power.

(5) Committee on Statistics. This Committee would review and analyse progress in the development of economic and social statistics in the region and assist members and associate members in improving the quality of statistics, the international comparability of data and the appropriate application of new techniques.

34. Within the context of its terms of reference, each Committee should identify the tasks to be undertaken during a specified period. Each Committee should indicate the outcomes expected from each task, set a time-frame for its achievement and monitor its implementation.

35. On the basis of the preceding guidelines, the secretariat should prepare detailed draft terms of reference for each of the Committees, taking into account the terms of reference set out in the annex to resolution 48/2, and bearing in mind that cross-sectoral issues, such as the special concerns of the least developed, landlocked and Pacific island developing countries as well as the economies in transition, the environment, and women in development, should be addressed by all the Committees. Stress should be laid on approaches and policy options that would lead to tangible outcomes. The draft terms of reference should be submitted to ACPR at its two hundred and thirteenth session, to be held on 3 April 1997. ACPR should, in turn, formulate a draft resolution on the restructuring of the conference structure of the Commission, including the finalized terms of reference of the Committees, for the consideration of the Commission at its fifty-third session.

36. Performance targets should be set for the work of each Committee as a means of ensuring that its work will generate tangible results.

37. In view of the difficulties faced by the Pacific island developing countries due to distance and the cost of attending Committee sessions, donors' assistance in facilitating the participation of at least one Pacific island developing country at each Committee session would be welcomed. Where such assistance is necessary, it could be determined through consultation with the ESCAP Pacific Operations Centre. Similar assistance should be considered for the least developed and landlocked countries.

(d) Ministerial and other intergovernmental meetings

38. Ministerial meetings (in addition to the annual Commission session) should be restricted to no more than one per year, with effect from 1998. In those years when a ministerial conference is held which is regarded as covering issues normally discussed in a corresponding committee or special body, that committee or special body should not be convened. Furthermore, ESCAP should convene regional intergovernmental preparatory meetings for global conferences only as mandated to do so by higher authority or when such meetings were determined to be absolutely necessary.

39. The number of intergovernmental meetings (other than Committee sessions) convened with the prior approval of the Commission should be reduced from the current 15 meetings per year to five meetings. The current maximum number of 100 days per calendar year for such meetings should be reduced to 25 days.

(e) Resource allocation and prioritization of activities

40. The Commission should set clear and realistic priorities that can be continually reassessed and readjusted to meet changing regional demands, especially in view of the resource constraints facing the Organization. Resources should be directed towards clearly identified priority areas.

41. The secretariat had disseminated a questionnaire containing detailed information on resource allocation at the programme-activity level, including the programme support area. Members and associate members were urged to respond expeditiously to that questionnaire. The secretariat was urged to ensure that the analysis of the governments' responses would be used as a basis for further adjustments to the programme of work, 1998-1999.

(f) Regional institutions subsidiary to the Commission

42. To facilitate and strengthen the work of the three regional institutions subsidiary to the Commission, namely the Asian and Pacific Centre for Transfer of Technology, the Regional Coordination Centre for Research and Development of Coarse Grains, Pulses, Roots and Tuber Crops

in the Humid Tropics of Asia and the Pacific, and the Statistical Institute for Asia and the Pacific, and in addition to the support provided by the host governments and donors, all members and associate members of ESCAP should examine the possibilities for enhancing their support for these institutions. The technical and substantive support provided by the secretariat for the functioning of the regional institutions should be strengthened.

(g) ACPR

43. ACPR should examine ways to enhance and improve its ability to advise and assist the Executive Secretary in drawing up proposals for the medium-term plan, the programme budget, and the work programme priorities and resource allocation, consistent with the guidelines provided by the Commission, and in monitoring and evaluating the implementation and outcomes of the Commission's programme of work, in accordance with paragraphs 2 and 3 of the terms of reference of ACPR, as contained in annex II to resolution 48/2, and to report back to the Commission at its fifty-fourth session.

C. Organization of the meeting

1. Opening of the meeting

44. The Meeting was opened by the Executive Secretary of ESCAP. In his opening statement, he highlighted the continued efforts of the Commission since the early 1970s to increase its efficiency and effectiveness in responding to the rapidly changing needs of its developing members and associate members, particularly the least developed, landlocked and island developing countries. Those efforts had been further demonstrated by the Commission's adoption of resolution 48/2.

45. The Executive Secretary stressed that the Commission should continue to strive to enhance its capacity to fulfil the aspirations of its membership on the threshold of a new century. He expressed his keen interest in benefiting from the views and suggestions of the participants, particularly with respect to the Commission's thematic priorities and subsidiary structure, and on appropriate modalities for carrying the work of ESCAP forward into the twenty-first century.

2. Attendance

46. The Meeting was attended by 85 representatives of 31 members and associate members of ESCAP: Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Fiji, France, India, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Netherlands, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu and Viet Nam.

3. Officers

47. The Meeting elected His Excellency Mr Ranjit Gupta (India) chairperson, Mr Ahmed Ali (Fiji), and Mr Kevin McGuire (United States of America) vice-chairpersons, and Mr Alexei N. Borodavkin (Russian Federation) rapporteur.

4. Agenda

48. The Meeting adopted the following agenda:

1. Opening of the Meeting.
2. Election of officers.
3. Adoption of the agenda.
4. Introduction of background documentation on:
 - (a) Findings and recommendations of the ESCAP secretariat Task Force;
 - (b) Findings and recommendations of the Advisory Committee of Permanent Representatives and Other Representatives Designated by Members of the Commission;
 - (c) Findings and recommendations of the eminent persons.
5. Review of the conference and programme structure of the Commission, including its thematic priorities.
6. Other issues relevant to the conference structure (e.g. ACPR, regional institutions subsidiary to the Commission, conduct of the annual sessions of the Commission, ad hoc ministerial and other meetings to be convened by the Commission, review of resource allocations and prioritization of ESCAP activities).
7. Recommendations of the Regional Preparatory Meeting on the conference and programme structure of the Commission:
 - (a) Conference structure: composition, representation, frequency and duration of meetings and operational modalities of the committees;
 - (b) Terms of reference of the committees;
 - (c) Programme structure.
8. Other matters.
9. Adoption of the report.

D. Adoption of the report

49. The Meeting adopted its report on 28 February 1997.